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ABSTRACT

A survey of 6th and 12th grade students in a Midwest school district reveals largely indifferent or negative attitudes toward social studies subjects. Forty-six students responded to questions which asked them to name the most important, favorite, and least favorite subjects and to recall what was interesting and uninteresting in former social studies classes. English, mathematics, and reading ranked ahead of social studies as most important; the majority of students based their decisions on skills needed for future careers. Seventeen percent chose rocial studies as the most important subject. Social studies ranked neither high nor low as a favorite or least favorite subject. Student comments indicate that it is not perceived as a particularly enjoyable subject and is not considered especially difficult. Elementary students enjoyed history and cultural studies while senior high students favored psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Many students found social studies content boring, citing that the information is too far removed from their experience, too detailed, or too repetitious. These reasons suggest the need to strive for greater variety in instruction and provide more opportunities for student success. (XC)

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Why Kids Don't Like Social Studies

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"We had a farmer thing the other day. We got into small groups and had to find out what kind of crops you wanted and then you could sell them . . . . that was kind of fun. I think what is boring is when day after day you have to sit and read and read and read."

Sixth grade student

"[In industrial arts] I'm constantly doing something. I'm not just sitting at a desk, you know? I'm up and about actually working. Sitting down just gets to me. I get tired of that after a period of time."

Twelfth grade student

Students frequently are not positive about their social studies experiences. Even more alarming are studies showing that young people do not feel social studies is a particularly valuable or interesting part of the school curriculum. It is apparent that if social studies is perceived by young people as not being valuable, then learning social studies will be adversely affected. With low levels of civic literacy and the apparent lack of public confidence in the quality of social studies teaching (Gallup, 1981), it is increasingly urgent that social studies educators pay attention to what young people, as well as others, might be able to tell us about ways to improve the social studies program.

Related Research

There have been a variety of studies which have found that social studies is not perceived by students as being among their favorite or most interesting subjects. The Science Education Databook (1980) reported that three percent of nine-year-old students named social studies as their favorite subject compared to 48 percent for mathematics and 24 percent for

language arts. Thirteen percent of students aged 13 and 17 reported social studies was their favorite subject. Shaver, et al. (1979) report similar results in their review of three National Science Foundation studies. Fraser (1981), using a semantic differential with Australian students, found that student attitudes toward social studies became increasingly negative with increasing grade level in grades 7-10. Fernandez, et al. (1976) concluded that high school students believed social studies was less important than mathematics and English for their future occupation. A reexamination of the data from the Fernandez study (Farman, et al., 1978) strengthened the case that future career is a strong determinant of how important students believe it is to learn a subject such as social studies. An earlier study by Curry and Hughes (1965) asked over 900, eleventh-grade students to rank in order of preference the five required subjects in their high school. In the overall ranking, social studies ranked fourth from the bottom followed by mathematics. Physical education, English, and science each rated higher. A similar poor showing for social studies was found among elementary students by Greenblatt (1962). Recently, there has been interest in developing a clearer understanding of the factors which influence student attitudes toward social studies. Haladyna et al. (1982) have established a theoretical model based on substantive data which identifies key variables which help shape student thinking about social studies.

Method

The purpose of our study was to investigate in an open-ended manner what elementary and secondary students think about aspects of the social studies curriculum and to generate some ideas for further research. The

studies done previously each had approached the problem by using written questionnaires and had focused largely on secondary students. We felt that doing interviews with both elementary and secondary students would yield a more complete picture of what students think about social studies.

We decided that we would like to get a "best case" look at student thinking about social studies. A Midwest school district was selected as the site for the study because it was similar to many middle size cities and had made special efforts to improve the social studies program at several grade levels over a span of many years.

We also decided that the cost of collecting, transcribing, and analyzing interview data meant that the sample size would be limited. The participants in the study were 46 students in two schools who were randomly selected from their social studies classes. Twenty-three students were selected from grade 6 and 23 students from grade 12. Fifty-two percent were males and 48 percent were females.

The interview protocol consisted of several questions which attempted to probe student thinking about their experiences in social studies classes. The following are some of the main questions which were asked.

- What do you think is the most important subject you study in school? Why?
- What is your favorite subject in school? Least favorite? Why?
- When you think about the social studies classes you've taken, what are some things you think are interesting? Why?
- What are some things in social studies classes which are not interesting? Why?
- Earlier you stated that [math] was your favorite subject. What is there about [math] that makes it more interesting to you than the social studies classes you've taken? Why?

. If you could tell teachers how best to improve social studies, what would you say?

The data from the interviews were transcribed. Two readers independently coded the data using code forms developed for the project. Differences between the readers were discussed and a consensus was reached on the coding of all student responses. The data were analyzed primarily by simple frequency distributions. The data were also examined by analysis of variance tests to check for differences in the student responses on the basis of grade level, sex, and socioeconomic status. Meaningful differences, when they occurred, are reported in the following section.

Results and Discussion

The percentages of student responses concerning what subjects they consider to be most important are given in Table 1. English, mathematics, and reading were ranked ahead of social studies and science. Students were very firm in their reasons about why some subjects were more important than others. Forty-eight percent of the students, with an even split between elementary and secondary students, said the reason for their choice was based on future careers. One elementary student felt English was important because "you have to know certain things about how to write business letters when you get older, if you're involved in business." Another elementary student commented that mathematics was important because "in most jobs you have to do a little bit of math." Many secondary students shared the same sentiments as the elementary students but were more precise in their responses. For example, one senior said mathematics was most important because "I plan to major in engineering" while another chose biology because, "I want to go into the medical profession."

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Nearly two-fifths of the students felt their subject choice was important because it provided them with skills which would be important in their future lives. Reading and writing skills were most frequently mentioned. A typical elementary student response was that reading was important because "you use it all through your life and you can learn a lot from that." Similarly, a secondary student commented that English was important because "it deals with communication and prepares you for life."

Seventeen percent of the students chose social studies as their most important subject. These students shared the reasoning of other students that a subject is important because the skills and knowledge it provides for the future. However, 13 percent of the high school students, hinted that social studies was important because of its emphasis on citizenship education. For example, one senior felt that social studies was important because "you learn about the state and everything in general . . . for elections and stuff. Stuff you need to know when you grow up." Another senior expressed his thinking about government courses by saying, "You can see behind the scenes of everything instead of just hearing it on the radio; and then you can think back, 'Well, I learned that back in 12th grade, so I know what they're doing.'"

Tables 2 and 3 report student responses regarding which school subjects they felt were their favorite and least favorite. Social studies did not rank high as a favorite subject, but neither was it frequently mentioned as a least favorite. In both cases, English and mathematics ranked higher than

social studies. The comments made by students who ranked social studies as a favorite or least favorite differed little from what students said about other courses. The mention of social studies just occurred less frequently. Reasons students preferred some subjects were that the courses were enjoyable or students were successful in them. "I like to read" and "I guess because I'm good at it" were typical responses. Reasons given for why some courses were least favorite usually referred to the difficulty of the subject or a dislike of the subject matter. "It's hard for me to learn the concepts" or "[I don't like] going through the nouns and prepositions - just learning all the rules" were characteristic comments. It appears that social studies is not perceived as being a particularly enjoyable subject, it is seldom mentioned as "important," and is not considered especially difficult. Since anticipated career futures appear to have an affect on attitudes toward courses and since few careers are directly related to social studies, this may contribute to an unenthusiastic response to social studies. Furthermore, the finding that students do not feel strongly one way or the other suggests that students may be indifferent in their attitude toward social studies. An alternative explanation is that the students simply did not want to tell the interviewers directly that they were strongly negative in their attitude toward social studies.

INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

In order to further examine student interests in social studies, the participants were asked what it was that they found to be interesting about social studies courses they had taken. The student responses were analyzed

in two ways. First, the responses were divided into two groups-one dealing with comments relating to social studies content and the other to teaching methods. Eighty-seven percent of the students' comments focused on social studies content and 13 percent mentioned teaching methods. This finding might be explained in two ways. First, it may mean that the teaching methods used in social studies classes differ little from the methods used in other courses. When students were asked to distinguish betwen social studies and other courses, the main difference they saw was in the type of subject matter involved. A second way to interpret the students' emphasis on social studies content might be related to social studies instruction. When students reflected upon their social studies classes, they were unable to quickly recall significant learning experiences like a field trip, simulation game, or a class discussion of a controversial issue. Instead, the student remembered only the general type of subject matter that was covered.

The next step in analyzing the student responses about what they found interesting about social studies involved taking a closer look at the type of content they felt was most interesting. Analysis of variance tests were performed on the type of content students mentioned by grade level. While the students were nearly evenly divided in their interest in government, some grade differences did emerge in other subject areas as reported in Table 4. For example, the sixth grade students mentioned studying history as an interest more than did the twelfth grade students. Typical comments of the sixth grade students were the following:

> "In fifth grade we studied the Depression. Sometimes I like to find out what they did a long time ago."

"[I liked studying] about the presidents that were most important, like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. It was fun learning about the past."

"I like learning about Christopher Columbus and the Indians--his sailing around the world and finding about the world was round."

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The elementary students also mentioned the study of other cultures as being an area of interest to them. As some of the following quotes indicate, the sixth grade students sometimes referred to the study of other cultures in an historical context.

"In third grade we talked about tribes and different people.... It's really interesting to learn about different people who do different things for different reasons and compare them to us and see what culture you like best."

"Last year I liked social studies because I learned about cultures and stuff. Probably the funnest thing I like about [this year] was studying about Indians in Minnesota."

"I liked to study about the Bushmen. I like to find out about their traditions and stuff."

"I like studying about the Ojibwe because you learn a lot of different words and about when they first came to Minnesota."

The grade twelve students differed from the grade six students in their responses about human behavior and the development of human civilizations. The comments of some seniors indicated that they had taken courses in anthropology, sociology, or psychology and apparently found these courses to be quite interesting. The following are some of their comments:

> "I liked anthropology because it's really interesting. Who knows if those skeletons were really people? It would be neat to know where we came from or what."
>
> "How people started . . . that was interesting. Just the way we developed from the ape man to the human being."
>
> "I liked psychology . . . for a wide variety of things [such as] how people think and what actually happens. The way people don't know that they are doing things."
>
> "I liked sociology and how the people reacted in a crowd. You know, it's a lot different when they act alone. I thought that was pretty interesting."

It's difficult to know how to interpret the grade level differences in the students' comments about what they found to be interesting about social studies. One interpretation might be that elementary students find tne study of history and of other cultures to be of particular interest while the secondary students are more interested in studying about human behavior and development. A second, and more likely, explanation is that the students were reflecting what they found to be interesting about the current curriculum and commented on those interests. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to note that there are important areas of the curriculum which students feel are of individual interest to them.

The students were also asked about what they found to be uninteresting in social studies. Table 5 summarizes the student responses. The most frequent student comment was that social studies was boring. Most often, boredom was attributed to social studies content, but teaching methods were also mentioned. The following are some characteristic responses.

> Sixth grade student: "[I didn't like] working with the government and ancient things. First of all, [the teacher] talks a lot about it. There isn't much work. Every day you know you're going to have social studies and just sit there."

> Sixth grade student: "Awhile back we studied about government. That was hard. Sometimes it got a little boring. It just seemed we were talking about other people sometimes--about budgets and everything."
>
> Twelfth grade student: "Well, it got boring when you are memorizing date after date, name after name, President after President--that type of thing. It gets a little tedious after awhile."
>
> Twelfth grade student: "I'm not interested in the past. I'd rather look into the future--ahead of us."

Another frequent response had to do with repetition in the social studies program. Nearly one-fifth of the students commented that they were not interested in repeating information they had learned earlier. For example, one sixth grade student said:

> When we studied the Native Americans . . . we were studying about one part; and then the next one was kind of like going over the same thing again."

Similar feelings were expressed by a twelfth grade student:

> "I didn't like [social studies] in the seventh and eighth grades . . . because most of the stuff then you do over and over again. It seems like you take it in the seventh grade; it's the same stuff in the eighth grade and ninth grade--and it's all the same."

Other student comments mentioned a variety of difficulties with social studies. Sixteen percent complained that social studies content was too "complicated" or "hard." Others felt that they spent too much time learning trivial details, memorizing facts, or experiencing routine, predictable teaching methods. Typical responses about routine methods were, "We just take notes, take tests, and watch the news," or "It was just read the chapter, do a worksheet, take the test."

The comments of students about what was not interesting in social studies reaffirms many of the concerns expressed by people in the field for several years. Clearly, many students find social studies content to be

uninteresting because the information is too far removed from their own experiences, too detailed for clear understanding, or repeats information learned earlier. As part of their comments about content some students mentioned specifically the lack of variety in social studies teaching methods.

We thought it would be useful to ask students about why their favorite course, when it was not social studies, was of greater interest to them than was social studies. Table 6 reports several of the types of comments made by the students. Over half of the students felt that their favorite subject was more interesting because it provided more opportunities for activities and for greater variety. The following are some characteristic student comments:

> Sixth grade student: "I guess because [in math] there's different things to do. You can times; you can plus . . ."
>
> Sixth grade student: "In social studies you mostly stay on a subject for a long time, like a month or two months; but in reading you can do worksheets and then you have different stories to study and stuff like that--about different things."
>
> Twelfth grade student: "In social studies class you're sitting inside a lot, digging in books. In horticulture you're outside, doing the things that you're learning. I feel I learn a lot more by doing that; by experience, you know."
>
> Twelfth grade student: "I like the problem solving aspect [of math]. In social studies the ideas are all there and you are learning them. Math is more of a subject where you've got a problem in front of you and you're figuring out the answers."
>
> Twelfth grade student: "[In social studies] it seems to me like you're always memorizing all these different things. In math, you are doing more things with them."

Nearly one-third of the students felt that being successful in their favorite course was the main reason they preferred it to social studies. "I'm better in math," or "I get better grades in English" were typical responses. Another set of student comments mentioned a desire to do more creative work; "In creative writing, you can write what you feel like and use your imagination;" or "I can create stuff in art" were typical responses. Other students felt that their favorite subject provided more opportunity to use the information immediately or they saw direct career applications. "Because [business law] pertains more to you; we just got done doing [a unit on] minors and employment and that's where we are right now," was a characteristic response.

The dominant reasons students preferred their favorite courses to social studies were providing more variety in instruction and being successful. While not surprising, these reasons do suggest that we need to strive for greater variety in instruction and for providing more opportunities for success if student attitudes toward social studies are to change.

The need for variety is reinforced by the student responses to the last question in the interview which asked students to identify ways the social studies could be improved. As Table 7 indicates, their responses really were a call for providing a greater variety in instructional methods. The most frequent comments asked for more group projects, field trips, class activities, role plays and simulations, and class discussions as well as asking for more independent projects and a greater role for students in planning the curriculum. Some additional student responses suggested how

the subject matter could be improved by relating it more to students' own experiences, reducing repetition in the curriculum, and focusing on other cultures. It is worth noting that only 7% of the students mentioned that the teachers themselves need to improve by being more enthusiastic or being closer emotionally to their students. Students preferred to focus their comments on teaching methods and content. They reported few problems with teachers as individuals.

Another observation can be made about the students' responses about why they preferred another subject to social studies and the students' recommendations for improving social studies. Earlier, when students were asked about what they found to be interesting about social studies, their responses overwhelmingly involved references to social studies content rather than teaching methods. However, when students were asked why they preferred another subject as their favorite, the students' most frequent response mentioned active learning activities. Similarly, students suggestions regarding how social studies could be improved uniformly focused on instructional methods. These findings strengthen the case that students attitudes toward social studies can be improved if social studies teachers use greater variety and more active approaches in social studies. This idea is further reinforced by earlier research which concluded that teacher quality is a central variable which directly influences students' attitude toward social studies (Haladyna, et al., 1982).

Conclusions

This study was designed to explore student thinking about social studies. An interview approach was used in an effort to provide a more in-depth understanding of the students' thinking than is possible by using

written questionnaires. A total of 46 students, 23 at grade 6, and 23 at grade 12, participated in the study. While one needs to be cautious in overgeneralizing from these findings, the data in this study do point to several conclusions which might be useful in further research.

1. Students do not consider social studies to be a particularly important area of study. English, mathematics, and reading rank higher because students see these subjects as preparing them for careers and teaching important skills which they will need in the future. Social studies teachers need to communicate to students why social studies knowledge and skills are valuable in the students' future lives. Perhaps more systematic emphasis on the important responsibilities of citizenship in the lives of students today and in the immediate future might be a good starting point. One way to do this might be providing students with more community based, "real world" experiences which can help students learn for themselves the importance of being an active citizen.
2. Students do not seem to feel very strongly in their attitudes toward social studies. It is not mentioned as a particularly favorite or least favorite subject. Social studies is not viewed as being a unique, enjoyable subject nor is it felt to be especially difficult. This finding leads us to the discouraging conclusion that students are best described as being indifferent in their attitudes toward social studies. It is not that students do not like social studies, it is just that they do not care much either way. This seems to support the earlier conclusion that social studies is simply not received by students as being a particularly important subject.

3. When asked about what they find to be interesting about social studies, students respond by commenting about subject matter rather than teaching methods. The students may not have been able to distinguish social studies from other areas of the curriculum on the basis of teaching methods and thus state their interests in terms of subject matter. Elementary students expressed interest in studying the past and other cultures, while the secondary students emphasized studying human behavior and the development of human civilizations. Differences in subject matter interests might best be explained by the influence of the social studies curriculum rather than an innate interest of students in these particular subjects.

4. When asked about what they find to be uninteresting about social studies, many students feel that both the subject matter and the teaching methods are simply boring. Others note that social studies often repeats content learned earlier and can be difficult to understand due to its complexity.

5. Student responses regarding why they prefer a subject other than social studies as their favorite and student suggestions for how to improve social studies are a clear call for greater variety in the social studies classroom. Students feel other subjects provide for more active learning experiences and greater variety. The student responses suggest that social studies teachers need to give renewed attention to using a variety of teaching techniques including group projects, field trips, role playing and simulations, and other class activities.

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Table 1*

Percentage of selected student responses regarding which school subjects are most important and supporting reasons.

Most Important Subject	
English	31%
Mathematics	20%
Reading	20%
Social Studies	17%
Science	11%

Reasons for importance	
Career preparation	48%
Life skills	37%
Enjoyable	11%
Other	7%

*The interview format used in this study enabled the students to have multiple responses. Therefore, the percentages reported in this and several other tables in this study do not always total to 100 percent.

Table 2

Percentage of selected student responses regarding their favorite subject and supporting reasons.

Favorite Subject	
Mathematics	30%
English	22%
Social Studies	13%
Science	11%
Art	11%
Industrial Arts	7%
Reading	7%

Reasons for favorite	
Enjoyable	57%
Good at it	30%
New learning	20%
Challenging	7%

Table 3

Percentage of selected student responses regarding which school subjects are their least favorite, and supporting reasons.

Least Favorite Subject	
Mathematics	33%
English	24%
Social Studies	15%
Science	15%
Music	7%
Other	3%

Reasons for Least Favorite	
Difficult subject	50%
Dislike the subject matter	22%
No purpose/boring	20%
Dislike teaching methods	15%

Table 4
Student Responses About Interesting Social Studies Content by Grade

	Total	Sixth Grade Students			Twelfth Grade Students			f
	%	%	SD	$\bar{X}$	%	SD	$\bar{X}$	
Study of the past	63	48	.56	2.96	15	.47	2.30	18.20***
Study of other cultures	54	35	.48	1.70	19	.50	1.40	4.5*
Study of government	28	13	.56	3.30	15	.54	3.26	.07
Study of human behavior	26	2	.21	2.0	24	.73	2.5	7.53**
Development of human	9	--	--	--	9	.39	1.17	4.63*

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Table 5

Percentage of selected student responses regarding what is uninteresting about social studies.

Boring	44%
Redundant subject matter	18%
Complex subject matter	16%
Difficult tests	15%
Routine teaching methods	13%
Dislike of history	13%
Memorization of facts	13%
Emphasis on trivial details	12%
Subject matter is easily forgotten	7%

Table 6

Percentage of Selected Student Responses Concerning Why Their Favorite Course was More Interesting Than Social Studies

More opportunity for active learning (experiments, activities, independent work)	35%
Successful in the subject	30%
More variety in the subject	17%
More opportunity to be imaginative, creative	11%
Information is of immediate use	11%
Applies to future career	7%
Challenging subject	7%

Table 7

Percentage of Student Responses Concerning How Social Studies Could be Improved

Group projects	13%
Field trips	13%
Less reading	13%
Role-playing and simulations	11%
Class activities	11%
Independent work	11%
Class discussion	11%
Student planning	9%
Less lecture	7%
Challenging learning experiences	7%
Clear examples	7%